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Rhetoric, Criticism, and Intent vs Interpretation

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One of my favorite aspects of literary analysis is rhetorical criticism. The lens through which you view a text—or any form of communication—inherently affects the conclusions you draw from it. You can use rhetorical criticism to create an argument and convince others of your analysis…even if that is simply your opinion…and not a fact. (This is how we get conspiracy theories!)

Intent vs interpretation is a nuanced subject; neither is fundamentally right nor wrong, but that doesn't stop people from making moral judgments about the text or the author based on their interpretation.

This is especially true when bias comes into play.

Bias is described by Merriam-Webster as

> "1a: an inclination of temperament or outlook
>
> especially : a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment
>
> b: an instance of such prejudice"

It isn't inherently a bad thing; bias can be positive OR negative. That said, when at the center of a viral shitstorm, you're more than likely to find yourself facing negative bias.

And thus the importance of analyzing bias, rhetorical strategies, and intent vs interpretation.

Pathos is one of the most effective rhetorical strategies—in United States politics, we see it at work every day with politicians preying upon people's fears, weaponizing their anger and bitterness. It can also be used to express one's excitement, to convey positivity and love to others.

It also doesn't have to be used at all. There are other appeals that one can use to convey information, such as ethos, and, my favorite, logos. As someone who comes from academia (and is acutely aware of how easily pathos can be manipulated) I rely first and foremost on logos. On grounding my thoughts in observable fact.

But it doesn't matter if you don't use pathos, and state only facts—audiences will inevitably make their interpretations due to their own bias. They're inherently predisposed to make

judgments based on their own context. More often than not, based on their feelings on the subject.

This is in some ways, to someone like me, who doesn't riddle communication with underhanded intent and meaning, exhausting. The curtains aren't blue to represent the author's feelings, the curtains are blue because they're blue. It's that simple.

But I cannot control how others will interpret my words. I can't change the minds of people who have entered a conversation with negative bias. I have spent years in critique spaces, where participants are held to certain standards of etiquette. The internet is a lawless place, where social standards go out the window.

The internet has put amateur and experts alike on the same playing field. And I don't mean this just in terms of creators, but critics as well. That doesn't make their criticism less valid, of course; people are entitled to their opinions. But that's what they are: opinions.

The algorithm rewards content fueled by emotion. More often than not these days, those emotions are negative—people are impassioned by perceived injustice. It's pathos at work. This, in tandem with parasocial relationships, where audiences become angry on behalf of others, assuming insult and injury when they are completely unaffected.

We see this with negative book reviews. People are all too ready to jump to the defense of their favorite books or authors, despite the fact that the criticism has nothing to do with them. A critique of a book is an opinion about a book, not a judgment of readers or authors. Disclaimer: I realize there are a plethora of reviews that DO insult readers or authors. I do not condone this type of "criticism," as it is a direct insult to those parties.

But evidence based conclusions aren't inherently insults. They're statements of fact, neither good nor bad. They aren't judgments or condemnations. If in conversation, someone asks if I am neurodivergent, or autistic, that's not necessarily an insult. If some angry gamer on the internet flames me, asking, "Are you [insert ableist slur of choice]", that is an insult. The language is chosen to provoke a specific emotional response, a perfect example of pathos.

Unfortunately, in text, tone can never truly be clear, despite our best attempts. Due to bias, an audience will bring their own emotional context and ascribe that communication. In short form content, it's impossible to fit all necessary context to convey your intended stance. And as much as you might try, you cannot force or control a reaction. You are putting your words into the world. People will have opinions.

But they're just that—opinions. Assumptions. Strangers on the internet do not know you—they cannot tell you who you are or what you did. Obviously there are exceptions to this; sometimes we unintentionally cause harm to others. There is no "undo" button in life, no Ctrl+Z that can easily erase our mistakes. But you are only responsible for what you actually did, not what others think you did. And at the end of the day, awareness of your actions and taking responsibility for them is what's most important.